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ABSTRACT

Contract learning is particularly suitable for teaching both the content and methodology of history in a college level, learner-centered, individualized format. Typically, a learning contract has three components. The first deals with the student's goals and objectives. The second component involves identification of the learning resources and activities to be used. The third and most important component is specification of the products, processes, and outcomes for evaluation and the criteria to be used in assessing them. Among advantages of the learning contract system are that (1) students are able to devise personally relevant learning experiences, (2) planning and self-reflection involved in contract formation fosters greater student self-awareness, (3) independent study prepares students for lifelong learning, and (4) undergraduates have an opportunity to work individually with faculty members. Disadvantages include the extra time required of faculty and the heavy demand placed on learning resources. Specific uses of learning contracts in history can be found in independent study and directed readings courses, honors courses and seminars, traditional courses which need more structure, and nontraditional and adult student classes. A sample contract which illustrates a combination of interests in history and business administration is provided. (Author/AV)

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TEACHING HISTORY VIA LEARNING CONTRACTS

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Teaching History Via Learning Contracts

In recent years there has been an increased recognition of the benefits to be derived from student-centered, individualized learning and instruction.[1] The purpose of this paper is to describe and exemplify a student-centered, individualized teaching strategy that we feel has, based on our substantial collective experience, considerable potential for widespread use in teaching college history. Specifically, we intend to describe contract learning and illustrate some of its uses in teaching history. Our experience indicates that this instructional strategy is appropriate for teaching both the subject matter and methodology of history. Contracting helps enable the teacher to make history relevant to the needs of students who might otherwise avoid it. In addition, contracting involves students directly in planning and undertaking their studies, making them active participants in their education and thus getting them out of the passive mode too often characteristic of the traditional classroom situation.

The Learning Contract

A learning contract can be described as an academic document, negotiated and signed by a student and faculty member, which takes into account the student's learning objectives, motivations, academic background, and abilities and then delineates what will be learned, what resources will be used and the manner in which they are used,

the evaluative methods and criteria that will be employed, and the time frame and credit allocation involved. Thus, the student and teacher are engaged in a way that is significantly different from the traditional classroom lecture-discussion relationship.

The higher education literature dealing with learning contracts shows this approach to have several advantages. Since learning contracts are negotiated between the student and faculty member, the student is able to express what is personally relevant and to devise a learning experience accordingly. The planning, negotiation, self-reflection, and critical thought about long-range objectives and immediate goals coupled with the added responsibility students assume with contract learning are themselves important learning experiences fostering greater self-awareness.[2] Contracting, by requiring students to study primarily in the independent study mode, also helps facilitate preparation for self-initiated lifelong learning, a major goal of contemporary post-secondary education.[3] Moreover, contracting heightens motivation because students see a contract as their own document. Related to this is another important aspect of contracts; they motivate students toward goal achievement rather than the avoidance of failure so typical of much learning today.[4] Finally, contracting offers the undergraduate student the opportunity to work directly with a faculty member, an advantage usually reserved only for graduate students.

Contracting does have several shortcomings, however. Students differ in their readiness and ability to learn via this mode, for a degree of maturity, organizational skill, and responsibility are necessary. Available evidence does indicate, however, that contracting is quite adaptable to and usable by many types of students and curricula.[5] Another shortcoming is that a great deal of faculty time and effort is utilized for negotiating with, orienting, facilitating, tutoring, and evaluating individual students, although faculty do often find teaching by this method personally rewarding. Finally, because it emphasizes individuality and flexibility, contracting puts a heavy demand on learning resources of all types.

Typically, a learning contract has three components. The first deals with the student's general and specific goals and objectives. Here it is important to insure that the objectives are appropriate given the student's abilities and background. For many students this is one of the rare instances in which he or she can discuss long and short term goals with a faculty member. The identification of the specific contract objectives is an important step for it plays an important role in determining the learning activities and resources employed.

The specification of the learning resources to be used and activities to be completed form the second component of a learning contract. In addition to traditional resources such as books, articles, libraries and films, other re-

sources such as museums, government agencies, community groups, experts in the field, and other students are among those available for use in a contract. Depending on the student, the learning resources used in a contract can either be spelled out in detail, thus establishing boundaries, or left open or suggestive, enabling the student to select those best suiting his or her needs. Given the wide variety of student objectives and abilities, the activities employed in a contract also tend to be diverse: reading; writing; literature searches and reviews; field study and field trips; problem-solving; developing thematic or interdisciplinary topics; interviewing experts; attending conferences; team projects; oral presentations; and others.

Especially important in contract learning is the specification of the products, processes, and outcomes for evaluation and the criteria used in assessing them. This is the third component of the typical contract. The contract should state explicitly what is expected of the student in terms of outcomes or products and what skills need to be demonstrated. Written and oral exams, position and term papers, book reports, personal journals, and oral presentations are some possible evaluative methods. The evaluative criteria established are largely a function of the student's level of ability, the degree of difficulty of the studies undertaken, and the evaluative methods chosen. Representative evaluative criteria include written and oral communication skills, evidence of effective research skills and techniques, and various cognitive skills.[6]

An Example of Contracting

The format and content of a typical learning contract are illustrated in Figure 1. This hypothetical contract illustrates just one of many possible approaches to and uses of contracting. The variety of ways in which contracting can be used in teaching history are outlined in the next section.

Our hypothetical example illustrates how contracting can be employed in handling independent studies. The hypothetical student is a business administration major who is minoring in history. She became very interested in several themes identified while taking a Western Civilization survey course. She approached her Western Civilization instructor and he agreed to offer her an independent study aimed at exploring these themes. Together they negotiated a learning contract. They first discussed the student's special interests and the objectives she hoped to meet in the contracted studies. Once these were established, the learning activities and evaluative methods and criteria were negotiated. The student's expressed interest in utilizing her background in media presentation was also built into the contract. Finally, after agreeing to the possibility of a mutually acceptable amendment to the contract, the student and instructor both signed and retained a copy of the contract.

Uses in Teaching History

Given the scope and nature of the field of history, contract learning appears to be a particularly promising teaching approach for both content and methodologically oriented studies at both the undergraduate and graduate level. In this section we will outline a number of possible teaching situations in which contracting can be applied.

Contracting can be utilized very effectively in handling independent study and directed readings. Nearly all departments offer independent study with individual faculty members. All too often such study is haphazardly organized and controlled. A learning contract would define the parameters of the study and spell out the requirements and expectations of both student and teacher. Another related use would be to employ contracting to provide short-term goals and pacing in thesis and dissertation guidance work. Again, such work is all too often unstructured and lacking in short-term objectives.

Another important potential use of the learning contract is the individualization of upper level courses such as seminars, colloquia, and honors courses where the number of students is manageable and the topics specialized. Courses dealing with historical field studies, applied historical research such as family history, oral history, local community history, and other hands-on research with historical evidence are especially amenable to the contracting method. So too are courses dealing with archival, interdisciplinary,

and problem-centered research. Contracting can also be used effectively in several ways to structure and teach portions of regular classroom courses, be they introductory or advanced.[7] For example, it can be employed in conjunction with term papers, team projects, and field trips, adding both direction and structure. Courses could be divided into modular units, mixing contracting with traditional classroom activities. Mixing instructional approaches is advantageous since students are heterogeneous in their learning styles.[8]

Whole courses could even be taught via learning contract. Students could elect one or more of a variety of predetermined contracts and complete them largely on a guided independent study basis. Another related possibility is to give students the option of either attending class and taking exams in the traditional manner or of undertaking independent work specified in a learning contract, thus enabling students interested in particular subtopics to explore them in some detail. Finally, contract learning holds special promise for work with the growing number of nontraditional and adult students who are often unable or reluctant to participate in the traditional classroom setting. For instance, contracting seems especially appropriate for minicourses and weekend colleges which are enjoying increased use in reaching nontraditional and lifelong learners.

Conclusions

Our experience has shown that contract learning is particularly suitable for teaching both the content and methodology of history in a learner-centered, individualized format. The contracting method can be used effectively either alone or for supplementing classroom instruction. It promises to be an important teaching-learning methodology for both traditional and nontraditional students. We hope this brief paper has encouraged an awareness of the uses of contract learning in teaching history.

NOTES

1. Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, Changing Practices in Undergraduate Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976).
2. Timothy Lehmann, "Evaluating Contract Learning" in Dyckman W. Vermilye (ed.), Learner-Centered Reform: Current Issues in Higher Education 1975 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975), 136.
3. P. Dressel and M. Thompson, Independent Study (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973), vii.
4. Janet G. Donald, "Contracting for Learning" (Montreal: Center for Learning and Development, McGill University, 1976), 2.
5. Neil R. Berte (ed.), Individualizing Education by Learning Contracts (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975), 1.
6. B. S. Bloom (ed.), Taxonomy of Educational Objectives Handbook I: Cognitive Domain (New York: David McKay, 1956). Also see James P. Johnson, "Integrating Educational Theory and History," The History Teacher, X (May 1977), 425-433.
7. R. M. Barlow, "An Experiment with Learning Contracts," Journal of Higher Education, XLV (June 1974), 441-449.
8. M. Goldschwind, "Instructional Options: Adapting the Large University Course to Individual Differences" (Montreal: Center for Learning and Development, McGill University, 1970).

FIGURE 1

Learning Contract

Student: Professor:

Address: Phone:

Phone: Contract begins: 9/8 ends: 12/18

Credit: 3 semester hours

I. General Goals and Specific Learning Objectives:

A. General: To earn a baccalaureate degree with a concentration in business administration.

B. Specific Learning Objectives: To study aspects of the history of Western Civilization from a thematic-conceptual perspective, pursuing interests stimulated in a Western Civilization survey course. To consider the proposition that the issues and problems we fact today are recurrent in the history of Western man. To allow the student especially to place her examination of various historical themes in the context of her own baccalaureate concentration in business administration and computer applications.

II. Learning Resources and Activities:

The learning activities for this contract center around a number of readings and the student's response to specific questions related to the readings. As the student progresses through the contract she is encouraged to integrate learnings from one assignment with those of another.

1. Read William Golding's novel, The Inheritors, and address in a 4-5 page essay the following question: Based on evidence

presented in the book, and your own perception of human values, which of the two groups depicted, Lok's or the New People, constitute a superior form of society? Why?

2. Read V. Gordon Childe, Man Makes Himself, and discuss in a 4-5 page essay his explanation of how man moved from stages of food gathering to organizing tiny villages of self-sufficient farmers to living in populous cities. Do you agree or disagree with his essential thesis of historical causation?
3. Read M. I. Finley, The Ancient Greeks, and describe in a 5 page essay a particular aspect of Greek society: for example, the organization called the polis; the Greek perception of the "good life"; or the value the Greeks placed on recreation and leisure time.
4. Read Ronald Duncan, Abelard and Heloise: A Correspondence for the Stage in Two Acts and comment in a 4-5 page essay on how the communication between these two lovers manifests medieval thoughts, emotions, and spiritual belief. Can similarities and contrasts be drawn to the Ancient Greeks?
5. A historian recently wrote that there are three fundamental problems of "social consideration"--authority, the division of labor and the allocation of goods and services. For it is in these areas that injustice is done, and it is around them that the sense of injustice clusters. Read Charles Dickens' novel, Hard Times, and comment on the validity of this assertion in a 4-5 page essay.
6. Read James Agee and Walker Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous

Men, and address the question of poverty as a recurring theme in Western Civilization. Use a medium or multi-media approach such as tape, film, and/or drawings to make your case.

III. Methods and Criteria of Evaluation:

The student will meet with her professor on a bi-weekly basis to discuss her readings and writing assignments. Her work will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

1. Level of discussions with her professor, and thus the comprehension and understanding of the readings reflected in these discussions.
2. Extent to which the essays address the various questions in an analytical fashion and adequately express her own feelings and beliefs based upon sound evidence.
3. Evidence of a clear and concise style of writing which conforms to the standard rules of English grammar.
4. An ability to develop a mini-documentary which reflects both artistic and technical skills.

Student_____

Professor_____